

Confronting the reality of dropout prevention in Kentucky

By Peggy Washington

With the recent release of Kentucky's Nonacademic Data, many observations were noted related to the state's dropout rate (grades 9 – 12):

- The high school dropout rate increased slightly from 3.34 in 2003 to 3.35 in 2004.

- The male dropout rate continues to be greater than the female dropout rate.

- The male dropout rate remained unchanged at 3.91 from 2003 to 2004.

- The female dropout rate increased slightly from 2.75 in 2003 to 2.77 in 2004.

- The African-American and Hispanic dropout rates continue to be higher than the Caucasian dropout rate.

- The African-American dropout rate increased from 4.45 in 2003 to 4.56 in 2004.

- The Hispanic dropout rate increased from 4.65 in 2003 to 4.77 in 2004, and

- The state's graduation rate increased from 79.15 in 2003 to 81.29 in 2004.

This data shows that there's no simple solution to such a complex problem. Why is it that year after year such reports send a very loud message? I would say that the message gets lost in overloaded daily operations and responsibilities. And why has it not reached the top of the priority list? I'm sure we could come up with many excuses. The fact remains that the high incidence of dropping out poses very serious consequences for the future of our children and Kentucky's economic and social outlook.

Can we forget the accountabilities outlined by Kentucky's General Assembly in 2000?

KRS 158.145 mandated the following by 2006:



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- The statewide annual average school dropout rate will be cut by 50 percent of what it was in 2000.

- No school will have an annual dropout rate that exceeds 5 percent.

- Each county will have 30 percent fewer adults between the ages of 16 and 24 without a high school diploma or GED than it had in the year 2000.

What is your district doing to reduce its dropout rate? This is a critical question, one that deserves an evaluative examination, thought-provoking review and research-based options.

Superintendents and school board members must ask the tough questions, identify the problems without hesitation, create applicable policies, conceptualize and establish district needs, set priorities, always evaluate, budget necessary funds and refuse to accept easy answers as solutions. Do whatever it takes, no matter what the challenge. It's also obvious that you alone cannot make this seemingly impossible task, possible.

Over the last 20 years, research has endorsed a number of successful dropout prevention strategies that have been proven effective in helping students graduate and move toward becoming responsible citizens. An abbreviated list of these strategies accompanies this column.

Research can provide us everything that we need to support students, help them graduate and become productive citizens. However, it's our responsibility to see that proven strategies are implemented successfully and make the impossible, possible for our children.

— **Peggy Washington** is an education administration program consultant with the Kentucky Department of Education.

Some effective dropout prevention strategies

- **Community Involvement** – Having all groups in the community provide a collective environment of support for the school and its students.

- **Family Involvement** – Research consistently finds that family involvement has a direct positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's academic success.

- **Violence Prevention** – A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, deals with potential violence as well as crisis management, promoting positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills.

- **Mentoring** – Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust.

- **Tutoring** – Tutoring is an activity that focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing and math competencies.

- **Conflict Resolution** – Skills that allow students to solve problems and increase self-control while building self-esteem.

- **Personalized Instruction Strategies** – Using teaching strategies that are custom designed and offer a variety of curriculum options for each student based on his/her academic learning needs.

- **Learning Styles/Multiple Intelligences** – When educators utilize and show students that there are different ways to learn, students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success and become lifelong learners.